

Message Text

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SUBJECT: CALLAGHAN PLANS BY-ELECTION TEST

SUMMARY: PRIME MINISTER CALLAGHAN PLANS TO TEST THE ELECTORAL WATER IN ENGLAND BY SCHEDULING TWO BY-ELECTIONS -- MANCHESTER MOSS SIDE AND PENISTONE -- IN MID-JULY. THIS DECISION WAS SOMETHING OF A SURPRISE -- HE HAD THE OPTION OF DEFERRING THE BY-ELECTIONS UNTIL THE FALL AND THEN AVOIDING THEM ALTOGETHER IF HE DECIDED ON A FALL GENERAL ELECTION -- AND INDICATES THAT HE WISHES TO HAVE A FURTHER READING OF PUBLIC SENTIMENT BEFORE DECIDING ON A FALL GENERAL ELECTION. ALTHOUGH LABOR IS FAVORED TO RETAIN BOTH SEATS, A SHARP SHIFT OF MOSS SIDE LIBERALS TO THE TORY CAMP COULD ALLOW THE CONSERVATIVES TO WIN THAT SEAT. IT SEEMS UNLIKELY, HOWEVER, THAT A LOSS OF EITHER SEAT WOULD AUTOMATICALLY CAUSE CALLAGHAN TO DECIDE AGAINST A FALL ELECTION. END SUMMARY.

1. PRIME MINISTER CALLAGHAN HAS DECIDED TO GO AHEAD WITH BY-ELECTIONS FOR THE MOSS SIDE AND PENISTONE SEATS
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RECENTLY VACATED BY THE DEATHS OF THE INCUMBENT LABOR MPS. WE UNDERSTAND THE DECISION TO GO AHEAD WITH MID-JULY BY-ELECTIONS, A PERIOD TRADITIONALLY AVOIDED BY LABOR GOVERNMENTS BECAUSE OF THE SUMMER HOLIDAY PERIOD, WAS DICTATED PRINCIPALLY BY CALLAGHAN'S DESIRE FOR AN ADDITIONAL TEST OF POPULAR OPINION BEFORE THE FALL. THE LABOR PARTY, CONSEQUENTLY, HOPES TO CONCLUDE THE

PROCESS OF SELECTING CANDIDATES FOR THESE SEATS BEFORE JUNE 19 SO THAT THE BY-ELECTION CAN BE CALLED FOR JULY 13. JULY 20 WOULD BE THE FALL-BACK DATE, IF THE SELECTION PROCESS IS NOT COMPLETED IN TIME.

2. MANY OBSERVERS EXPECTED THESE BY-ELECTIONS WOULD BE DELAYED UNTIL AFTER THE SUMMER HOLIDAYS -- AS WAS COUNSELLED BY SOME LABOR PARTY LEADERS -- BECAUSE THE MID-JULY THROUGH AUGUST PERIOD IS TRADITIONALLY A TIME FOR FACTORIES TO CLOSE, ALLOWING WORKERS A HOLIDAY PERIOD. THIS IS PARTICULARLY TRUE IN THE INDUSTRIAL NORTH WHERE BOTH THESE CONSTITUENCIES ARE LOCATED. ACCORDING TO LABOR PARTY'S NATIONAL AGENT, REG UNDERHILL, CALLAGHAN THOUGHT IT WOULD BE TACTICALLY ADVISABLE TO HOLD THESE BY-ELECTIONS IN THE SUMMER, FIRST BECAUSE ANY DELAY WOULD SIGNAL THE TORIES THAT A FALL GENERAL ELECTION WAS ALMOST CERTAIN AND, SECOND, BECAUSE HE WANTED ANOTHER TEST OF ENGLISH VOTER SENTIMENT TOWARD LABOR AND THE GOVERNMENT. IN THIS REGARD IT IS WORTH NOTING THAT THE NORTHEAST CONTAINS A VERY LARGE NUMBER OF MARGINAL SEATS. THE GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS IN THIS AREA MIGHT WELL DETERMINE WHICH PARTY WINS AN ELECTION AND WHETHER EITHER WILL HAVE AN OVERALL MAJORITY IN THE NEXT PARLIAMENT. IF LABOR SHOULD DO PARTICULARLY WELL IN THESE BY-ELECTIONS, THE PROBABILITY OF A FALL ELECTION WOULD BE INCREASED, THOUGH LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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THE LOSS OF THE MOSS SIDE SEAT, DEPENDING ON THE CIRCUMSTANCES, MIGHT NOT NECESSARILY PERSUADE CALLAGHAN TO WAIT UNTIL THE SPRING.

3. THE PENISTONE SEAT VACATED BY TRIBUNITE JOHN MENDELSON SEEMS TO BE VERY SAFE -- LABOR'S MAJORITY OVER THE SECOND PLACE TORIES WAS GREATER THAN THE TOTAL TORY VOTE. THE MOSS SIDE SEAT VACATED BY MODERATE FRANK HATTON, HOWEVER, COULD BE A DIFFERENT STORY. ALTHOUGH NOT A TRUE MARGINAL, THE OCTOBER 1974 LABOR MAJORITY WAS ONLY 4,100 VOTES (UP FROM 2,400 IN FEBRUARY), WHILE THE THIRD PLACE LIBERAL CANDIDATE TOOK NEARLY 6,000 VOTES (18 PERCENT). IF, AS SEEMS LIKELY DUE TO THE SUMMER HOLIDAY PERIOD, THERE SHOULD BE A LOW TURNOUT FOR THE BY-ELECTION AND, AS SEEMS PROBABLE, A SHARP DECLINE IN THE LIBERAL VOTE, THE DIRECTION IN WHICH THE LIBERAL VOTERS MOVE WOULD BE DECISIVE. WHILE DEFECTING LIBERALS NORMALLY SHOW A MARKED PREFERENCE FOR THE TORIES, THIS TENDENCY VARIES FROM CONSTITUENCY TO CONSTITUENCY AND IS TO SOME EXTENT DEPENDENT ON THE CANDIDATES NOMINATED BY THE TWO MAJOR PARTIES. A TORY VICTORY IN MOSS SIDE, ACCORDINGLY, IS A VERY REAL

POSSIBILITY AND ONE WHICH WOULD CERTAINLY INFLUENCE
CALLAGHAN'S ULTIMATE DECISION ON THE TIMING OF A
GENERAL ELECTION. BREWSTER

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